

take KARE of your PLANET: Carver

County composting a model for the nation

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It may seem like a long way from a pile of garbage to the beautiful blooming gardens of the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. But there is a connection. And it's in the compost.

"It's really the next generation of composting, recycling, Arboretum's Director of Operations Peter Moe said. "Things are perfectly easy to recycle, pizza boxes, milk cartons that people in the past never did."

Yes, the beauty that abounds here at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum is rooted in what you might call garbage and what Carver County environmentalists refer to organic recyclables.

"Any non-recyclable paper. Any paper that's gotten food waste on it. You wouldn't want to see that in the normal recycling container. But it's great for our composting project," Carver County Environmentalist Anne Ludvik said.

The egg shells and their cartons, the ice cream containers and the paper plates, it's all good for this project, which begins with Carver County residents separating organic recyclables into special bins. It ends with haulers dumping them at the Arboretum's compost site.

"There's five stages to the composting process. There's grinding, there's mixing, there's turning," contractor Kay Yanisch from RW Farms said.

There's curing and screening too. Eventually there's compost. Once it's processed, it's available for sale for \$10 dollars a yard.

"It's like a giant kitchen mixer where we mix all the branches and the leaves from yard waste and food waste, and the greens from the yard waste as well, to make this recipe," Yanisch continued.

They grind and mix it and then nature simply takes its course. The natural decomposition process heats the pile to a temp upwards of 130 degrees. A mark it must maintain for a minimum of 10 days.

"We don't have a million employees, but we do have billions of little micro organisms who are working for us," Yanisch said smiling. "We'll turn it approximately at three times over the life of the pile. And it will take three to six months to create finished compost."

Six months to go from pile of trash to plant-growing treasure.

"What compost is doing is really taking a natural process and managing it on a larger

scale," Yanisch added.

"Now with the new composting organics, along with the yard waste, that's a model that can be duplicated across the country," Moe said.

And, according to these environmentalists, the country is watching.

"Every week I'll get another state calling asking me for that information," Recycling Specialist Ginny Black said.

Black is with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, the group charged with insuring the compost site isn't doing any environmental harm. So far, Black says, it's operating well.

"This is a real national trend. We happen to have some data that nobody else has. But, everybody is looking at this now," Black said.

About 900 Carver County residents are currently separating out their organic recyclables. Ludvik says many of them have been able to get a smaller can for actual trash.

The process hasn't been perfect, prompting some complaints from nearby residents about dust and occasional odor. But officials say, on the whole, the pros far outweigh the cons.

"Unless people want to stop producing garbage, which I don't think any of us are willing to do, we need to continue to look for alternatives for managing our waste, and leave the earth a better place we've found it," Ludvik said.

"There's a high percentage of material that we are throwing away that could be taken out of landfills and brought to a facility like this and made into beneficial product," Black added.

A beneficial product once destined for a landfill now perfect for landscaping.